

Multicultural Work Force in Construction Organisation – Issues of Health, Safety & Environment

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Abstract

Multicultural workforce dominates emerging construction Organisation in today's global business environment and consists of teams from different nationalities with diverse cultural orientations and values. The study examined how issues such as changing age, sex, religion, ethnicity, physical ability, race, sexual orientation of employees affect health, safety and environment. Issues such as language or communication barrier, cultural challenges, religious differences, practice/technological issues are some of the challenges that project and construction managers must embrace and address squarely. It was therefore recommended that construction Organisations must have a unit charged with cultural orientation, language training and better utilisation of government policies regarding migration of workforce.

Keywords: Multi-culture, Workforce, Health, safety and Environment, Construction industry.

1.0 Introduction

We are living in a world that comprises of five (5) continents, 192 UN member states (www.un.org), made up of different demographic structures comprising of black, white, females, males old, young...with different beliefs (Christians, Muslims, Hindu, Buddhists....speaking various languages (English, Arabic, Hebrew, Garman, Spanish, Chinese... dotted with unique climatic conditions such as Freezing in Iceland, Canada, Scotland and hot as in Saudi Arabia, UAE...

The phrase "Multicultural workforce" refers to the changing age, sex, ethnicity, physical ability, race, and sexual orientation of employees across all types and places of work in a Country.

Multicultural work force has become increasingly common in recent times, and it has been identified by many scholars that management of multicultural work force is a significant aspect of general human resource management. Earley and Mosakowski (2000) stated that "multicultural teams are used because they are perceived to out-perform monoculture teams, especially when performance requires multiple skills and judgment".

While "Multicultural workforce" is still used in reference to employees of varying social, racial, and ability characteristics, the scope of diversity goes further and includes not only the personal characteristic of an Organization's employees but also the way an Organization responds to a multicultural workforce (Crockett J.1999).

With the growing international activity in the construction industry, there has been an increase awareness of the importance of better understanding of cross cultural management particularly on the construction industry (Torrance, 2004) as the work force may be drawn from different countries, using many languages and have variety of cultural background. Culture frames the ways in which we express ourselves (Longford, 2000) and how we interpret the actions of others.



Fig.1 showing different Nationalities

People from different nationalities and ethnic groups (fig 1 above) express themselves and understand the behaviours of others in different ways, which are informed by specific sets of cultural knowledge and conventions. Thus, cross-cultural mis-understanding occur which can lead to HEALTH AND SEFETY PROBLEMS.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 A General Overview

The use of migrant work force is a world-wide phenomenon and it is a common practice in the United Kingdom. Balch and Geddes (2010), noted that a structurally embedded reliance on cheap and “flexible” migrant workers has always been a key feature in the UK construction sector.

Project management has developed considerably since the last twenty years with a much greater understanding of the key variables that lead to projects overall success. Within this period, there has been a drastic and noticeable change in the way construction projects are handled. This change according to (Weatherley, 2006) is especially noticeable in Western Europe where local levels of investment have drastically dropped and many contractors are now working on projects in other parts of the world with different cultural orientation. On the other hand, workers from other part of the world such as Asia, Africa and Oceanic have equally been seen working in the Western Europe and America. The application of electronic communications according to Carson et al (1995) has led to a number of heavy construction projects being designed and developed in different locations thousands of miles away from the actual construction sites. This in the word of J. English (2002) has resulted in more multicultural project teams with members from different cultures working together.

Many authors and scholars opined that project success is difficult to accomplish where the project team are from locations close to the construction environment (Weatherley, 2006), and the situation is made considerably complex for multicultural project teams, that are widely separated geographically and that have different organisational structure and regional cultures.

2.2 Safety, Health And Environment Challenges In Multi-Cultural Workforce

There are high degree of chances that managers of projects will face challenges in his effort to bring such project to completion and in such a manner that it satisfies his clients business objectives in terms of cost, quality and time, whether the project is geographically dispersed, located locally or internationally. Mahalingam and Levitt (2007) stated that construction projects with participants from multiple countries can often lead to conflicts and delays due to different cultural perceptions of acceptable levels of safety among the different project participants.

2.2.1 Language /Communication Barrier

Communication according to E. Ochieng and A. Price (2010), is a professional practice where suitable tools and regulations can be applied in order to improve the utility of the data communicated, and it is also viewed as a social process of interaction between individuals on common or varying issues. Miscommunication is seen as a strong negative force for teams (Schmidt, 2007).

Construction workers who come from different ethnic groups express themselves and understand the behaviours of others in different ways, based on specific sets of cultural knowledge and conventions. This often results into cross-cultural misunderstandings which can lead to health and safety problems. The inability to immediately communicate verbally on construction sites represents one of the major challenges to successful management of health and safety on the construction site.

Kartam et al (2000) noted that the greatest barrier confronting construction site managers in the Middle East is communication; it does not only hamper daily communication, but also lead to late completion of project. In the Middle East, English, Hindi, Urdu, Italian and Greek are in common use in the construction site. This creates an obstacle when interpreting safety signs on site because of the composition of the workforce. The few who can speak English due to the influence of British colonialism are further hampered by the intonation, accent and fluency, thereby posing a challenge of understanding and interpretation of health, safety and environmental rules on site. This was stressed by Mecklenburg (2002) that language and cultural barriers and misunderstandings can get in the way of effective communication and create safety complications in the workplace.

The geographical division of multicultural project teams poses communication challenges. Emmitt and Gorse (2007) also observed that when it comes to multicultural workforce many issues regarding communication remain unresolved. For example, the loss of face-to-face communication can lead to misunderstanding and the loss of non-verbal signals – such as eye contact and body language. They reasoned that such can lead to difficulty in achieving mutual trust and confidence among team members. It is also difficult to manage or supervise multicultural project teams without face-to-face contact or to confer or develop relationships (Weatherley, 2006). These can in no doubt pose a Safety and health challenge as will be examined in the text later.

In the same vain, (Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006), in their study observed that the Australian construction industry has a high proportion of migrant workers whose language is not English as such they rely on their native language to communicate on site thereby hindering the integration of the entire workforce. Such situation according to them resulted to “linguistic ghettos” thereby preventing the team from adopting a general onsite language.

2.2.2 Cultural Challenges

Kartam et al (2000) in a research on construction safety in Kuwait reported that there was an extensive use of foreign labour; that have different labour cultures and traditions which reflect on human relations, different work habits, orientation, ethics and communication problems; and the workers were emotionally vulnerable and preoccupied with their problems. Combination of these factors can affect the concentration and attention of the worker and may contribute to mistake which may result to fatal accident on site.

2.2.3 Religious Differences

Construction site is a multi-religious environment and this uniqueness need to be understood and appreciated especially when working in religious nations like Saudi Arabia or Iran where women and in some cases men wear religious dresses which cover their faces and ears. Inter faith Organization UK (www.interfaith.org.uk) observed that this can present a particular problem on health and safety rules when working on site, as such dresses may not permit clear vision of moving site equipment, or a falling object, it hinder site interactions and relationship.

2.2.4 Practice/ Technological Issues

There are remarkable differences in industrial practice in various parts of the world, and these practices are unique in their own way and are tailored along some guidelines which the workers in such environment need to follow. The technology may be inexistence in the countries where the migrant workers come from and as such constituting a challenge to adopting new technology. This lack of working knowledge of an existing technology in a new environment to workers will constitute safety and hazardous risk. Haslam et al., (2005) noted that workers engagement on safety ideas will help to reduce accident.

3.0 Strategies To Overcoming Safety, Health And Environment Challenges In A Multicultural Construction Industry

Clarke (2003) argues that it is difficult to integrate employees from diverse backgrounds into a corporate safety culture, but that human resource managers must develop techniques and practices to develop and maintain positive safety attitudes for all employees as demonstrated in Hofstede's model on cultures (1984). The model gives an understanding of how workers can effectively communicate with each other at the work place which includes: individualism versus collectivism, large or small power distance, strong or weak uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and short-term versus long-term time orientation.

3.1 Solution To Religious Challenge (Tolerance)

To effectively solve the challenge of Safety, health and Environment on the construction site as previously identified, it is essential that the site Manager receive adequate training on cultures of the employees. He need to know their religious inclinations in order not to offend them such as knowing the time for prayers, fasting or holiday. For example the site manager for reason of safety may disallow a fasting worker from working on height because he may not be fit enough under such condition. In addition, proper religious orientation should be given to site workers particularly on the issue of health and safety by informing them of the need to observe certain safety rules and regulations on site, for example they could be provided with reflective jacket that would cover their whole body- head to toes, a safety helmet that will cover their entire head, and other dresses that would make them fell adopt to health and safety culture.

3.2 Solution To Communication Challenge (sign interpretation/use of images)

In the UK and some nations abroad the issue of communication as a challenge to Safety health and environment could be solved by translating safety information, use of interpreters and a variety of visual methods such as sign and poster, fact sheets, brochures, guides, forms, logs, checklistto communicate essential health and safety information to the migrant workforce.

3.2.1 Solution To Language Barrier (Train and being trained)

Language differences as observed in the literature are issue that has both positively and negatively connotations. Negatively, it has affected the productivity level of an organization particularly when considered within the framework health and safety. In Genesis (11:1-9) it was observed that given the differences in language that occurred the builders of a tower became incapacitated and as such could not finish up their project.

Therefore, to solve the issue of health and safety challenges on construction site, site managers should undertake to do the following:

- undergo language courses of those that are predominantly spoken on site
- Develop a good listening skill in order to understand the popular site language
- Set up a language learning unit
- Sensitivity training (Site managers should use their words very carefully when they talk or write to employees from other cultures.

3.3 Solution To Cultural/Traditional Challenges (Good rapport)

By understanding the customs of the employees and expressing a sincere interest in their tradition, a manager can establish a rapport with his multicultural work force. This would facilitate better communication, hence costs can be cut and productivity can be increased.

3.4 Solution To Technological Challenge (Body language)

Technological advancement and application is not globally similar. These dissimilarities constitute major cause of accident to migrant workers who are not knowledgeable on the use of such new machines and equipment given that such equipment is not similar to what they know. Demonstration with the aid of body language or any other method of communication to point the exact equipment being referred to would help to mitigate the risk of accident occurrence.

4.0 Conclusion

Multicultural workforce is an essential part of today's global business environment and consists of team from different nationalities with diversified ways of perceiving the world by their cultural makeups. Miscommunication among the multicultural workforce resulting in misunderstandings is the main issue that is challenging health, safety and environment in a construction industry. One of the primary dangers of such linguistic ghettos is the inability of migrant workers to interpret safety warnings on the site, thereby resulting to accidents. Communication through the use of interpreters, body language, visual methods such as sign and poster, fact sheets, brochures, guides, forms, logs, checklistto communicate essential health and safety information to the migrant workforce appear to be the best solution to the challenges of multicultural workforce.

5.0 Recommendations

For future research on this topic, I make the following recommendations:

- To have a unit in an Organization that is primarily responsible for cultural orientation of the multicultural workforce.
- To make a review of government policies regarding migration of workforce (where do they go and where are they from)?
- To investigate contractors attitude to language training of their newly recruited multicultural workforce.

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